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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000165

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, PRM
GENEVA FOR RMA

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TAGS: [PREF PHUM PREL TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND'S HANDLING OF ROHINGYA "BOAT PEOPLE" OFF
ITS ANDAMAN SEA COAST: APPARENT PUSH-BACK POLICY

REF: BANGKOK 139

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Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Thai military officials and villagers along Thailand's southern Andaman Sea coast described push-back actions of ethnic Rohingya to RefCoord January 22, but maintained that Thai civil defense volunteers and fishing boats, not Thai military officials, had been involved. UNHCR representatives have requested access to the Rohingya, but the MFA suggests that no detainees remain, and that regional diplomatic efforts should focus on the primary source and destination countries: Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Ambassador engaged MFA PermSec Virasak Futrakul later January 22 with our concerns about the reports on Rohingya and what we had heard from military officials and villagers. Virasak replied that the Thai military had denied the Rohingya had been harshly treated and explained that the MFA would engage regional countries concerned, particularly Bangladesh, the source country from which he claimed the Rohingyans were being smuggled, and Malaysia and Indonesia, the primary intended second destination countries.

12. (C) Comment: The account of apparent local citizen push-back efforts are disturbing. The RTG appears to realize it faces a problem that is regional in nature and plans a regional diplomatic approach. It remains unclear whether the heightened public scrutiny and awareness of what has been occurring off of Thailand's Andaman Coast will change the ad hoc on the ground approach taken by Thai officials and, apparently, by deputized villagers. We will continue to engage the RTG on this issue.

What happened? Thai military deputizes villagers

13. (SBU) RefCoord traveled to the southern Thai seaport of Ranong and met with Royal Thai Army (RTA) Colonel Sangob Nakthonom, Deputy Director of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) January 22. Sangob's office is directly responsible for local policy towards boats carrying

Rohingya encountered in Thai territory. Sangob described the "boat people", almost exclusively male, as a security threat to Thailand, citing fears the Muslim Burmese would become involved in the unrest in the three majority Muslim provinces bordering Malaysia. Sangob stated that the Royal Thai Army (RTA) had instituted a new policy towards arrivals during the current sailing season, which lasts during the break in the monsoon from October to June, which had led to the push-back effort. According to RTA records, 1,391 Rohingya had been removed from Thai territory since October 2008; Sangob confirmed several groups of Rohingya boat people had arrived since December.

¶4. (SBU) Rather than attempting to return Burmese illegal migrants to Burma, which has in the past refused to accept the Rohingya with the explanation that they are not citizens of Burma, Sangob explained that army personnel had conducted training for villagers on several of the inhabited islands along the maritime route from Bangladesh to Malaysia, the presumed destination. The three days of training for the volunteer "Civil Defense Force", normally held twice a year, included weapons' handling, crowd control, and how to search detainees for hidden weapons. Sangob conceded that there was no discussion of human rights standards in the training and no attempt to determine if any were victims of human trafficking. The civil defense volunteers were then responsible for responding to any landings by migrant-carrying boats in the southern region.

¶5. (SBU) Sangob described what had unfolded: Local civil defense volunteers rounded up any encountered Rohingya boat people, guarded them, provided them food and water, repaired the boats they arrived in, if possible, and provided sails.

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RTA personnel occasionally visited the site where the Rohingya were held, but day-to-day management was left to the civil volunteers. The migrants were then placed aboard one of the now-seaworthy vessels and towed out to sea by local Thai ocean-going fishing boats.

¶6. (SBU) Colonel Sangob denied any role by army, navy or marine police in towing the vessels. He appeared uncertain about how the arrangements were made to tow the Rohingya vessels, or how far they were taken out to sea, suggesting it was an informal arrangement of "seafarers helping seafarers." Sangob acknowledged that the RTA had compensated villagers for some of the costs involved in repairing the vessels and feeding the confined Rohingya, but he claimed the RTA did not have a role in arranging the tow-outs.

¶7. (SBU) RTN Admiral Ruengphit Piengthong, responsible for the south of Thailand, separately told RefCoord that on December 12, 2008 a navy vessel brought 206 Rohingya who had landed on an island about four hours away by boat to Sai Daeng island to join other Rohingya detainees. Ruengphit stated this was the only time the RTN had become involved with Rohingya boats in the current sailing season. He denied press reports that the navy had been involved with towing migrant vessels out to sea and setting them adrift. Ruengphit stated that limited navy assets (there are only ten personnel stationed in Ranong, a major seaport aside Burma) prevented any sustained role.

Visit to Island in question

¶8. (SBU) On RefCoord's subsequent visit to Payam Island, located about 5 miles off the Thai coast and in clear view of Burmese territory, Thai civil defense volunteers told much the same story. Four Rohingya vessels had run aground on the island since early December, with a total of about 350 passengers. Villagers alleged the boats were intentionally run up on the coast of Payam in order to obtain assistance. RefCoord observed the latest vessel still washed up on the beach. A crude wooden vessel of about 30 feet in length, it

had carried 54 men and boys. Concerned about the security of the village's 250 inhabitants and the threat to tourism on the island, civil defense volunteers told RefCoord the Rohingya were brought to nearby uninhabited Sai Daeng island.

There they stayed on a small strip of beach for three to five days, joined by other Rohingya brought there by the Royal Thai Navy (RTN). At one point, they said about 420 boat people were on the beach, which is about 150 yards long and hemmed in by impenetrable brush and hill.

¶9. (SBU) According to the villagers, Food and water were provided to the Rohingya until a large fishing trawler arrived to tow the group in several repaired vessels out to sea. The villagers said the trawlers were not local, but fishing in the Andaman Sea from Maha Chai on the Gulf of Thailand. No Payam civil defense volunteers accompanied the fishing vessels, but they later heard from crewmen that the Rohingya were towed for about 10 hours until they were outside Thai territorial waters. On the afternoon of January 22nd, there were no Rohingya on the small beach at Sai Daeng island, and villagers told RefCoord that no new boats had arrived at Payam island since January 1st.

UNHCR efforts

¶10. (SBU) The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Bangkok has repeatedly contacted the MFA in recent days to request a meeting and access to any Rohingya held by the RTG. The MFA's dip note response made no mention of either request. Informal conversations between UNHCR and the MFA reveal that the RTG is willing to engage on the issue of Rohingya boat people as part of a regional forum, the

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context the RTG deems proper, since it views the Rohingya boat people as a regional issue. UNHCR will continue to press for access to any Rohingya held in Thailand but accepts the notion of a regional framework for discussion.

Ambassador engages MFA PermSec

¶11. (C) Ambassador engaged MFA PermSec Virasak Futrakul January 22 with our concerns about the reports on the Rohingya. He referenced UNHCR inquiries and press statements that the MFA was conducting an investigation, told PermSec Virasak that RefCoord had talked to both local military officials and deputized villagers involved, who confirmed details of push backs, suggested that actions taken by non-government officials opened up avenues for the allegations of abuse, and asked what the status of the RTG investigation was.

¶12. (C) PermSec Virasak replied that the Thai military had denied that the Rohingya had been harshly treated and stated that they had been provided food and water. Regarding the UNHCR report that there were still over 100 Rohingyans on the island/in custody, Virasak said that the Royal Thai Army (RTA) maintained that none are now left. RTA Commander GEN Anuphong had informed Virasak, however, that there were a total of 20,000 Rohingya illegally in Thailand.

¶13. (C) FM Kasit had instructed Virasak to call in Ambassadors from involved countries to initiate discussions on how to deal with the Rohingya issue, Virasak stated. Rohingya have told the Thai that smugglers were involved in their transit, chartering boats from Bangladesh. Virasak claimed that while UNHCR has accepted 27,000 Rohingyans in Bangladesh as refugees, there were another 200,000 in Bangladesh who have been screened out. This population represented the root problem - as the first recipient country, Bangladesh was not accepting them for local integration. Those individuals had then turned to the option of traveling by sea, aiming for Malaysia and Indonesia as secondary destinations. This was now the season of calmest

waters, facilitating travel.

¶14. (C) Virasak claimed that UNHCR had to move carefully on this issue, because it realized many of the Rohingya involved were really economic migrants, not refugees. UNHCR-sponsored meetings on the Rohingyans in Geneva in the past had not resolved the issue. Thailand felt Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia were the primary stakeholders involved - the former as the country of departure, and the latter two as destination countries. Thailand had been drawn in this year because more Rohingyans have drifted into Thai waters/Thai island.

JOHN